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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical scheme and research methodology for studying marital interaction among elderly couples. The derivation of the conceptual scheme from the perspective of symbolic interaction, and the specific concepts used in the conceptual model, i.e., the social act, role taking, agreement on frame of reference, and confidence or trust, are explained in an initial section. The methodological procedures used to implement the interaction model are described in detail, including information about the Department of Sociology Interaction Laboratory at Temple University, techniques for gathering data about the couples who participate in the interaction study, and the specific study procedures, e.g., the use of videotaped skits. The formalized conceptual scheme for the interaction model is discussed in detail and represented in diagrams in the appendix. (AG)

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A CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK
FOR THE STUDY OF FAMILY INTERACTION AMONG THE ELDERLY

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Presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Boston,
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A CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY
OF FAMILY INTERACTION AMONG THE ELDERLY

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical scheme and a research methodology for studying marital interaction among elderly couples. Over twenty years ago Buerkle and his associates at Yale developed an approach to the study of marital interaction which was based on the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, and which utilized a methodology involving simulated conflict situations (Buerkle and Badgley, 1959; Buerkle, 1960; Buerkle, Anderson, and Badgley, 1961). Our present work is a continuation of that early effort.

In deriving our conceptual scheme from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we assume that human interaction is the basis for human social life, that it (interaction) takes place primarily through the use of language, and that its form and content is learned. Through interaction the individual self emerges, which, in turn, makes group life possible. The symbolic complexes that emerge through interaction further determine the course and boundaries of interaction within groups. The learning of values, norms and expectations, as well as the learning of roles and statuses (frequently called socialization) take place through symbolic interaction.

This theoretical approach allows us to draw on the conceptual lexicon of George Herbert Mead (1934). We utilize the following concepts: the social act, role taking, agreement on frame of reference, and confidence or trust:

- a) The social act refers to an interactional sequence between two or more individuals.
- b) Role taking, or taking the role of the other is the process whereby each individual involved in a social act symbolically anticipates the

response of the other individual(s) to a specific statement, non-verbal gesture, or action. That is, they put themselves in "the shoes of the other person." The predictions involved in role taking require that both persons be mutually involved in an on going social situation.

- c) Agreement on frame of reference occurs when the persons included in a social act each possess a similar attitude toward how to proceed with the subject in question. That is, they share a mutual viewpoint.
- d) Confidence or trust is expressed when interactant A believes that interactant B will make a correct prediction concerning A's action. Believing that one's partner can accurately predict our own action or attitude in a social situation is an expression of confidence.

The theoretical model which allows us to combine the above concepts into a coherent scheme involves the use of Newcomb's A-B-X paradigm. This paradigm distinguishes seven different elements or communicative factors in a social act (or social situation).

(The hand-out you should all have formally presents our conceptual scheme in a series of five diagrams. The intricacy and complicated nature of the model precludes a reading of it to an audience of this size--SEE THAT HAND-OUT HAS, IN FACT, BEEN PASSED OUT TO THE AUDIENCE.)

On the basis of that conceptual scheme, we have developed a set of intricate methodological procedures. These enable us to arrange a set of quasi-experimental situations that provides measures of role taking accuracy, agreement on frame of reference, and confidence or trust in one another.

Our approach provides a new set of dimensions for studying the social psychology of the aging couple. The analysis of data on role taking accuracy, agreement on frame of reference, and degree of confidence or trust can lead to a determination of whether or not there are changes in these interactional processes due to age and/or length of marriage; in addition to issues such as a) whether or not role taking varies during the sub-stages of preretirement, immediate post-retirement, and several years after retirement, b) the nature

of the relationship between role taking accuracy and agreement on frame of reference and marital satisfaction as well as life satisfaction among elderly couples, and c) whether or not differences in socio-economic level effect role taking, agreement on frame of reference and confidence or trust among aging couples.

In a study on role taking accuracy of parents and offspring, Stryker (1957) found that parents who were comparatively poor at role taking were "significantly better adjusted with reference to their offspring" than parents who were more accurate in taking the role of the other. The inaccuracies of the parents meant that they failed to perceive the differences between themselves and their children. These findings appeared to be the consequence of wishful thinking and vulnerability on the part of the parents. "The self identifications and respect of parents are bound up with the lives of their children to a greater extent than are those of such offspring with the lives of their parents." (Stryker, 1957, p.477). The unexpected inverse relationship between role taking accuracy and parent-offspring adjustment held especially for parents who were either highly traditional, dependent, or low in agreement on familial attitudes. In this regard we have posed several research questions: Does this type of relationship hold for elderly couples with middle aged children? Are there similar relationships between couples of long duration, when one spouse is dependent on the other? In what ways are role taking, agreement on frame of reference, and confidence or trust related to the marital problems of middle aged and elderly couples? Our present efforts represent an expansion and improvement on the earlier work done by the junior author.

Methodological Procedures:

Our experimental approach is made possible by the use of the Department of Sociology Interaction Laboratory at Temple University. The laboratory was designed by the junior author and colleagues. All experimental rooms are equipped with TV monitors, and TV cameras. A switchboard in the master control room allows the experimenter to feed audio, and/or video signals to any, or all of the rooms. All communications are recorded on videotape. Presently, we feed signals (videotape) to the small experimental rooms, and generally deal with one couple at a time, although we have the capacity to see three pairs, simultaneously.

Couples who participate in our pilot studies spend about forty minutes in the laboratory. The post-session varies between fifteen to twenty-five minutes. When they arrive, couples are sent to the small experimental rooms described earlier. The presence of audio-visual pickups are pointed out, so that the couples are not misled, and to date, we have not experienced a refusal to participate.

The couple is asked to complete a background questionnaire with the usual demographic data, in addition to information about the nature and extent of the relationship they have with each other. These are used as control variables. They are read a set of standard instructions by the experimenter, alerting them to the decision-making equipment they will use, and orienting them to the overall procedure. In separate rooms, the couple views a series of seventeen videotaped skits depicting typical problems encountered by people living together. Our present collection of skits average about 30 to 45 seconds each.

In each skit, there is a conflict of interest between a man and a woman; however, they are constructed in such a way as to give each person some legitimate grounds for argument. The subject couple members are not able to communicate with each other during presentation of the skits, therefore, they cannot influence or prejudice each other's opinion when called upon to evaluate the merits of each argument.

The skits were videotaped in a home situation, utilizing actual married couples who were trained to our purposes. An example of the type of conflict skits we present to our couples is:

Husband: Ever since I was transferred to the shipping department last month, I haven't liked to go to work. So I think I ought to retire in June.

Wife: I really don't think that is a very good idea. You are only 61 and that's not old. We also know that our income will be a lot lower when you retire.

Husband: I know, but I feel kind of old and we would get along somehow.

These sequences, which our subjects view, represent problems which are typically facing aging couples. The skits involve conflicts over the use of money, relations with children, friends, and intra-couple social activities.

The subject couples are asked a series of questions after viewing each skit. They are unable to hear, or see each other's responses. The questions asked are as follow:

Suppose you were faced with this problem: with whom would you agree, and how strongly?

At this point, each subject can indicate agreement, with two degrees of intensity, with either the man or the woman in the skit (i.e., choosing one of four possible responses). The decisions for each subject (man and woman) are

recorded on tape in the control room. The remainder of the questions are answered in the same way.

The results of this question, give us a direct measure of agreement on frame of reference, and the degree to which the members of the couple agree.

The second question asked after each skit is presented to each subject is as follows:

Suppose _____ (partner's name) was faced with this problem; with whom would (he/she) agree, and how strongly?

Once we have gotten a response from the male and female subject's we have, in effect, a direct measure of how accurately each partner is able to take the role of their mate. We get one of these measures for each of the seventeen skits. By comparing A's orientation with B's estimate, the measure of role taking is complete.

The third question asked about each skit involves a measure of A's confidence or trust as to what he or she (A) believes B believes he/she (A) will do in reference to the situation solution (X). The question we ask here is:

With whom do you suppose _____ (partner's name) thought you would agree, and how strongly?

A fourth question gives us a more direct, action oriented reading from the subjects. We ask, as a final question after each skit:

If you were the man/woman in this situation, what would you do?

This, of course, is much more direct than question 1 which asked if they would agree with the woman, or the man. In our post-session, we bring our subjects together and videotape a session where we re-introduce skits where it appeared they were not reaching agreement on frame of reference, or where there was high role taking inaccuracy. The subjects are then asked, as they face

each other, "Here is a situation you've seen earlier. If you were the people here, what would you do?" We then tape their efforts to deal with the situation.

For the earlier treatment of the skits seen in isolation, a scoring system is employed to form an overall picture of the couple's interaction regarding the skit.

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A FORMALIZED CONCEPTUAL SCHEME

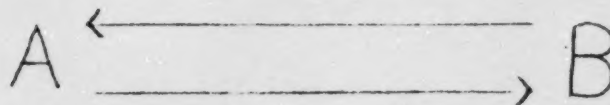
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There are many more facets to the somewhat hybrid symbolic interaction-
ist-situation analysis position we take, but we begin with the Meadian assumption
that the basic unit of analysis is the social act. Beyond this, we note that the
least complex group, the dyad (or couple) can be conceptualized as follows:

Figure 1



We assume that person A is symbolically communicating with person B, and vice-versa: Person A has expectations of B, and B has expectations of A. In fact, the essentials of interpersonal perception of the dyad are more complex than depicted in Figure 1. Theodore Newcomb (1965) writing in 1953, utilized a paradigm in discussing "communicative acts" that is useful to our argument. Newcomb's purposes were somewhat different from our own, as he was not directly utilizing theoretical assumptions of G.H. Mead, so we have revised his model

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to suit our developments. The models are highly similar, though, with ours somewhat more complex.

Newcomb called his model the A-B-X system. In essence, it is portrayed as follows:

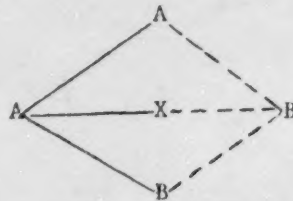


Figure 2

Newcomb saw the A-B-X paradigm as a diagrammatic representation of Person A's phenomenological self, i.e., A's orientation (what he is thinking) concerning himself, Person B, and any object (or topic) they may jointly consider. X represents that object. Following Newcomb's logic, there are six elements, or communicative factors, or essentials, that Person A considers as he interacts with B about X (any X). We now have numbered Newcomb's paradigm to correspond with a list of A's orientations and estimates to indicate what happens. Note Figure 3:

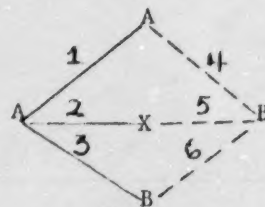


Figure 3

1. A's orientation toward A's own self.
2. A's orientation toward X.
3. A's orientation toward B.
4. A's estimate of B's orientation toward A.
5. A's estimate of B's orientation toward X.
6. A's estimate of B's orientation toward B's own self.

Note that 1, 2, and 3 are facts. One can ascertain them by asking A. But, 4, 5, and 6 are A's estimate of what he thinks B would or will do. Notice, also, that A can be correct, or incorrect, concerning any or all of these estimates. In fact, the dotted lines (4, 5, and 6) are representations of Mead's (1934) taking the role of the other. Fascinatingly, Newcomb apparently didn't realize, or wasn't interested in pursuing the idea that he had within his model the capability of getting excellent measures of role-taking, agreement upon frame of reference, and interpersonal trust, and/or confidence. Beyond this, the model allows for assessment of a variety of inter and intra-personal conceptions of self.

Simultaneously, as we consider the structure and activities of Figure 3, where elements 1 - 6 are "going on in A's head" as he interacts with B, the complement to this is occurring in B. Note Figure 4:

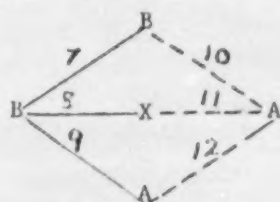


Figure 4

- 7. B's orientation toward B's own self.
- 8. B's orientation toward X.
- 9. B's orientation toward A
- 10. B's estimate of A's orientation toward B.
- 11. B's estimate of A's orientation toward X.
- 12. B's estimate of A's orientation toward B's own self.

Again, the dotted lines (10, 11, and 12) represent estimates made about the "other," and can be made to manifest the accuracy with which B (in this case) can take the role (be empathetic with) of A concerning B, A, and X. The utility

of a formal approach to such information for decision-making and conflict research should be obvious.

Figure 5 illustrates another variation of the paradigm we have developed for our work:



Figure 5

We call your attention to the dotted lines connecting A and X (13 in A's Phenomenological Self), and B and X (14 in B's Phenomenological Self). In the first instance, we have A's estimate of B's estimate of A's orientation toward X. Put more simply, what does A believe that B believes that A will do about (or in reference to) X. In effect, this is a measure of the confidence or trust A believes that B has in him (A) concerning what he will do.

We believe that the application of the paradigms we have detailed is most effectively set in specific situations. Human beings as they act out their daily lives do not interact along some "average" or "central tendency", but do so (with emotions) in specific situations. We believe the analogy to drama is an efficient one (Coffman, 1959). Though we all have personalities, we activate specific aspects of that personality as we move from situation to situation, role and status to different roles and statuses throughout time sequences. In each new situation, the role expectations for actors (persons) can be expected to change.

We are not equally powerful in all situations--whatever our power will or may be depends upon the normative conditions and role relationships which confront us in each situation. Further, our individual commitment to specific statuses and roles is variable between situations, and over time. Thus, among the factors we consider is the situational impact of the processing of person's expectations through time. Situations, like a social act, have a beginning and an end. But the two are different. Situations are "staged...that is, the elements of a situation typically assembled, arranged, manipulated, and controlled by human beings (Stone and Farberman, 1981)." Social acts--acts involving a consideration of two or more persons--may be over in an instant, or last for years.

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